**HOMILY AND READINGS FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

**(April 28th)**

**THE READING from the BOOK OF ACTS**

*A reading from Acts (8.26-40)*

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went.

Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’

So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’

He replied, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: ‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.’

The eunuch asked Philip, ‘About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’

Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptised?’ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

This is the word of the Lord.  **Thanks be to God.**

**NEW TESTAMENT READING**

*A reading from 1 John (4.7-21)*

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

We love because he first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

This is the word of the Lord.  **Thanks be to God.**

**THE GOSPEL READING**

*Listen to the Gospel of Christ according to St John (15.1-8)*

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

‘I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.’

This is the Gospel of the Lord.  **Praise to you, O Christ.**

**HOMILY** by the Revd Canon Rhiannon Johnson

It was one of those evenings in late April, early May when the plant life around us said that spring was truly underway, but it still felt cold, damp and uncomfortable. It was not the best night for visiting a vineyard in the Vale of Glamorgan, but the group I belonged to had scheduled the trip, booked the minibus and we were going, rain or shine.

It was over thirty years ago, but that evening has stayed with me vividly because of what I learnt about vines and vinedressers.

That evening, the vinedresser was an enthusiastic middle-aged man, completely in love with his vineyard and the idea of making wine, even if we were not exactly in the South of France. The family had bought a home with a pony paddock some years before and, when the daughter and her pony had grown up and left home, the man had decided to fulfil a life-long dream and own a vineyard.

We stood in the former pony paddock looking at his vines before being taken away to, I think, the former garage to taste last year’s vintage and buy some for ourselves.

I remember what I saw so clearly. The vines were bare and were bleeding. Clear sap oozed from multiple cuts on them. Their bare stems writhed like bodies in pain. It was not what I had expected.

The jolly owner explained that they had just finished pruning these vines. I believe he used the word ‘scouring’. The pruning was far more violent and extensive than I would have expected, having only pruned roses before. I think the vinedresser must have been prepared for a reaction like mine because he explained what he had done in a way I will always remember.

He told us that, left to itself, a vine will produce a lot of leaf and many small, bitter clusters of fruit that never truly mature. The vine puts its energy into its survival as an individual plant and puts on leaf to soak up the sunshine and to feed itself well.

The vinedresser, however, wants the plant to be fruitful and, to do that, he must convince the plant that it is likely to die. Only then will put its energy into, not its own survival, but the survival of the species, and produce plentiful large, sweet fruits.

He may have been a bit eccentric, definitely an enthusiast, but he loved those plants and I found a wine I enjoyed very much. It was a good evening out but, more than that, the Sunday before we had heard this reading from the Gospel of John and the words echoed in my head as I looked at the scoured vineyard. I wondered if, left to ourselves as Christians, we did a lot of things that made us feel good as individuals but did not make us very fruitful in the way God wants us to be fruitful.

I wondered if the decline and weakness of the church in our days was to force us to think less about our own salvation as individuals and more about the mission of God to the whole world, to make us bear fruit that will last.

As a Diocese we are about to start a ‘Pruning for Growth’ strategy which the Bishop will announce at an extraordinary Diocesan Conference on July 6th. The details will be given us then, but we can be sure that there will be some hard decisions to be taken but also that they will be taken with great care. Pruning can never be pleasant for the plant, but the vinedresser does it because he loves the plants and their fruit too much to let them waste their energy on things that do not, in the end, help the vineyard to flourish.

In the meantime, for us as individuals, can you take some time to consider your own fruitfulness for God? How you can stay rooted in Christ? What you can let go and allow to be pruned away so that whatever energy you have goes into the things that bear lasting fruit?

**COLLECT OF THE DAY**

Almighty God, through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ you have overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: grant that, as by your grace going before us you put into our minds good desires, so by your continual help we may bring them to good effect; through Jesus Christ our risen Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**